

Montgomery police boosting pedestrian safety strategy

County officers plan to issue more tickets to jaywalkers

BY VICTOR ZAPANA

Jaywalkers in Montgomery County, beware.

A week after a county report revealed improvements to pedestrian safety — and Montgomery officials touted its safety program — county police have pledged to issue more tickets to jaywalkers.

In fact, said police Capt. Thomas Didone, the ticketing began Thursday.

At monthly intervals, there will be teams of police officers stationed at eight streets that have been designated by the county as having pedestrian safety problems, county officials said.

"In the past, maybe we would have two officers at an intersection, 10 people crossing, and there was no way for us to stop them all. Now maybe we will have maybe six or eight officers," Didone said.

The streets — called high-incidence areas — were the focus of the report, which was presented at a meeting Aug. 26 with county officials and residents. They are part of the county's \$3.2 million Pedestrian Safety Initiative, which focuses on public education, police enforcement and infrastructure road changes to improve pedestrian safety.

The targeted areas include a mile-long stretch of Piney Branch Road in Silver Spring, which is a major thoroughfare into Prince George's County; a quarter-mile stretch of Wisconsin Avenue by the Bethesda Metro station and many

shops; and a half-mile stretch of Connecticut Avenue in Aspen Hill by a major shopping center.

The study looked at the number of pedestrians collisions that occurred in the first six months of each year from 2005 to 2011. This year, there were 174 incidents, the lowest in seven years. It also follows a steady decrease from 2008, when 220 pedestrians were hit.

The percentage of pedestrians collisions resulting in serious injuries this year — 23.6 percent — is the lowest in seven years.

And collisions at high-incidence areas saw a sharp drop in 2010, according to the report. From 2005 to 2009, the number of collisions ranged from 37 to 46. In 2010, the number was 18.

Several officials were reluctant to say that the recent improvements were caused by the program, spearheaded by County Executive Isiah Leggett (D). They said they need more data before they can make such a claim.

County Council President Valerie Ervin (D-Silver Spring) attributed much of the decline to the initiative but also said she thinks the drop occurred because walking and biking have become more popular modes of transportation.

"More people are getting out of their cars and becoming pedestrians, and you have more of an ability to empathize with people walking when you're a walker too," she said.

But the results have caused some regional officials to consider tweaking their pedestrian safety programs to be more like Montgomery County's.

The Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments — which implements a public-education Street Smart safety campaign in

Maryland, Virginia and the District — may adjust its program to better target specific hot spots in the region, said Mike Farrell, the council's bicycle and pedestrian planner.

Still, Farrell worries that belt-tightening in Montgomery may make it more difficult for county officials to maintain their results.

"There may be ways to spend smarter or more effectively, but... I'm afraid that if the budget is reduced, they probably will get worse results," he said.

This fiscal year, the Pedestrian Safety Initiative will have over \$500,000 less than it did last fiscal year, according to county figures. Last fiscal year, the program received \$1.3 million less than in the previous fiscal year, forcing officials to cut some programs, such as an education campaign targeting immigrants and other at-risk groups.

Jeff Duncel, pedestrian safety coordinator for Montgomery County, said officials would "target our resources to get the biggest bang for the buck."

In fiscal 2011, police met with drivers 127 times at high-incidence areas and issued 11 citations. Police also issued 11 citations to pedestrians and met with pedestrians 2,609 times. Didone said police would continue to "maximize the effect of these contacts."

The change is a good thing, say some residents near Piney Branch Road.

"A cop there would help a lot," said Mario Martinez, 54, who added that he thinks the traffic is a problem. While he hasn't seen any people being struck, he knows that speeding cars have killed several stray cats.

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